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ABSTRACT

South Africa, the last urban, industrial, Western-culture society without television, called for television introduction on January 1, 1976. Thus, South Africa represented the last chance to explore certain research questions about the impact of television in modern societies. A study was made of: (1) factors in the South African context which make research easy or difficult, (2) current plans for the introduction of television in South Africa, (3) the current research plans and capabilities of South African scientists, (4) research which should be done in the light of experience in other Western societies, and (5) steps which might be taken to facilitate necessary research. (Author/HB)

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TELEVISION IN SOUTH AFRICA:

THE RESEARCH PARADOX, PROBLEM AND POTENTIAL[1]

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ABSTRACT:

TELEVISION IN SOUTH AFRICA:

THE RESEARCH PARADOX, PROBLEM AND POTENTIAL

South Africa is the last urban, industrial, Western-culture society without television; plans now call for TV introduction January 1, 1976. South Africa thus represents a "last chance" to explore certain research questions about the impact of television in modern societies. The article explores: (a) factors in the South African context which make research easy or difficult; (b) current plans for the introduction of television in South Africa; (c) the current research plans and capabilities of South African scientists; (d) research which should be done in the light of experience in other Western societies; and (e) steps which might be taken to facilitate necessary research.

In 1976, television will be introduced into South Africa. This event marks the final stage of a major innovation: the spread of a powerful new communication medium to all the literate, industrial nations of the world. It also signals the last chance scientists have (a) to do research on a television-naive, but otherwise urban, literate, population, and (b) to make longitudinal studies of the effects of television in a Western culture starting from a pre-television baseline. The urban, industrial, television-free society is an "endangered species" which is about to become extinct.

But while South Africa offers a unique, last-chance, research opportunity, the factors which have delayed the introduction of TV may also make international research difficult. The society presents special social, economic and political problems for the behavioral scientist. In spite of the importance of the research possibilities, political constraints both there and here make it likely that man may miss his last opportunity to explore crucial questions which may not otherwise easily be answered.

Historically, in Western television societies, such as the United States, Canada, Britain and Western Europe, the potential importance of television was not fully recognized at the time of its introduction. Thus, typically, the insertion of television into a society has been accompanied by relatively little, modestly funded research. As the pervasive influence of television became increasingly apparent, however, public concern--and research funding--usually increased sharply. For example, the U.S. government recently committed a million dollars to research on television and social behavior, a two-year budget several

times larger than the sum spent in the first decade of television (Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, 1971).

In addition, early television research has typically had theoretical and methodological shortcomings. Initially, there tended to be a lack of awareness of issues which later emerged as crucial. Research methodologies tended to be somewhat primitive. And researchers were not able to gather adequate baseline data which might make for important and sophisticated comparisons later.

Some questions become extremely difficult and costly to answer, once television is diffused through a society. And some important questions may become almost impossible to answer. For example, it becomes extremely difficult in a television society to untangle the relationship between developmental changes in children and their exposure to television. Research indicates that younger children react differently from older children to such TV inputs as violence. This could be due purely to developmental factors as the child matures. Or, it could be that early TV inputs sensitize or desensitize children to later television inputs, making them respond in a way they would not without a previous history of TV-viewing. Or, the reaction of a maturing child may arise out of some combination of developmental factors and his past experience with the medium. The answer to such a question is likely to have important practical implications for the parent, the TV producer, the educator, the therapist, and governmental agents concerned with the use of public airwaves.

Similarly, it is virtually impossible in a TV-saturated society to study some aspects of the long-term impact of television on children's social behavior. In the United States, for example, it is impossible to control the television inputs of groups of normal children over periods of a year or two. The only populations with whom this is possible are incarcerated delinquents, retardates, or orphans--samples distinctly different from the general population. There are some children, of course, whose TV input is narrowly constrained by their parents, but a comparison of such children with the more typical child to evaluate the impact of programming would be contaminated by the likelihood that parents who restrict their childrens' TV exposure are likely also to subject their children to different socialization experiences. Finally, in a television society, it is difficult to obtain good, pre-exposure, baseline measures which might be valuable for a range of later comparisons. The typical U.S. child begins watching television at a very early age. And by the time he is able to respond to verbal questions or experimental tasks he may already have seen thousands of hours of television. He, thus, may already have been subject to the long-range impact of television.

In the United States and Britain, questions about developmental factors and long-range impact are precisely the questions which are emerging as paramount. The Surgeon General's Report on Television and Social Behavior (1971), for example, concludes:

> Finally, we must call attention once again to the gap in longitudinal research on the effects of television programs on children. This gap needs to be filled before we can learn something dependable about the long-term effects of repeated exposure to standard television fare on the personality development of the child (p. 114).

Given the urgent need for research in a non-TV-exposed society, the potential social and scientific significance of the South African research opportunity is obvious. Certain practical considerations, however, must be evaluated. (a) What are the general factors in the South African context which make research easy or difficult? (b) What are the current plans for introducing broadcast television into South Africa? (c) What are the current research plans and capabilities of South African scientists? (d) What research should be done in the light of the experience of other Western societies? And (e) what steps can be taken to facilitate necessary research? The authors visited South Africa early in 1972 to explore these questions. The following report is based on that visit plus subsequent correspondence and contacts with South African and other international researchers.

The South African Context

South Africa is, in the words of Allen Drury's book title, A Very Strange Society (1967). Along many major dimensions, it is startlingly similar to the United States (Michener, 1972). In one key aspect, however, it has taken a different historical turn. Whereas the United States is attempting to resolve internal racial problems with an official policy of integration, the South African government has adopted an official policy of "separate development" for the races, or apartheid. This policy has led to tension between the South African government and the governments of other nations. Similarly, within the country, the policy has ramifications throughout the political, social and economic fabric of the society.

The South Africans distinguish among several racial groups: (a) the European or white population, composed of English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking sub-populations; (b) Asians, composed of all orientals (except Japanese who are officially considered "white"); (c) the Colored, composed of mulatoes, Hottentots, and descendents of Asian slaves; and (d) the Bantu, the black African population which is composed of at least six distinct cultural subgroups, each with its own language and unique tribal heritage.

The government has been firmly in the hands of the Nationalist Party since 1948. Orlik (1970) has detailed some of the positions within this government which have led to the postponement of television's introduction. A frequently cited reason is economic: the introduction of television would be very expensive and the nation has had other economic goals of higher priority. In addition, however, South Africans have expressed concerns about the possible social and political consequences of the new medium. The party in power has worried that a flood of foreign television material might undermine traditional family, religious, and political values. Meanwhile, the opposition parties have been similarly cautious. They fear that television might provide the government with a powerful new means to maintain political control.

Thus, television per se is a sensitive political issue. At the time of our visit (February, 1972), the government had announced plans for introduction, and a preliminary target date was set for April, 1975. Subsequently, the starting date was moved back to 1977, and then finally set for January 1, 1976. The stated reason for the shift was, largely, economic. Officials fear the introduction will have an

inflationary effect on the economy. And there seems to be some hope that shifting international gold prices will favor South African balance of payments during the investment in foreign television equipment.

In South Africa, the government exercises strong influence over the mass media. Television, when introduced, will be a part of the South African Broadcasting Corporation. Modeled after the BBC, the SABC is a "public utility organization," which, in South Africa, means an effective monopoly of broadcasting. There will be no "independent," commercial television networks. Unlike the BBC, the SABC accepts radio advertising and thus generates its own financial resources. Critics suggest that, also unlike the BBC, the SABC has a daily "viewpoints" program--its broadcast "editorial page"--and that the SABC consistently supports national policy. The SABC has internal screening committees and can come under review by the Publications Control Board.

In general, however, observers see little need for censorship or governmental pressure on the SABC. The organization is staffed with personnel who are attuned to SABC policies and traditions. For example, SABC radio performers are told: "Remember you are a guest in people's homes. Please comport yourself accordingly." The present SABC hierarchy will take television under its wing, rather than having a brand-new, parallel structure for TV. Thus, the political and social tone of internally produced television is likely to be very similar to current SABC radio.

Other mass media (e.g., cinema, magazines, books, etc.) come under the direct jurisdiction of the Publications Control Board. This

body has the authority to review mass media messages and remove from sale those which are judged to be offensive. Extremes of sex and violence are censored. Messages about interracial love or conflict are tightly controlled. And the mass media are screened for messages which are judged politically subversive or revolutionary.

As in the United States, social science research is conducted by governmental research organizations and in the universities. The newest governmental research agency is The Human Sciences Research Council. It funds extramural research by investigators around the country. In addition, it conducts its own intramural research activity. One of the newest branches of HSRC is the Institute of Communication Research. This body is currently charged with responsibility for conducting research on the introduction of television in South Africa. A second governmental research organization, the South African Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, dates back to World War II. In particular, its National Institute for Personnel Research has a strong tradition in social psychological research. It could do contract research on the effects of television, but has no such plans at present.

The white universities are split between English and Afrikaans, the two official national languages. The English-language universities tend to be modeled after the British university system, while the Afrikaans-language universities bear a stronger resemblence to continental schools. In both types of university, while research takes place, teaching is primary, and the university-based research institite is relatively rare. Typically, an academic department has one full professor who is also the department head. The rest of the department is organized

hierarchically under this man. It is uncommon for a junior man to head up an independently-funded research team within this framework.

For the visiting scientist, South Africa has both advantages and disadvantages. In many ways, the culture and language facilitate research for the British, Canadian or U.S. investigator. He is likely to feel very much "at home." He can easily employ instruments and methodologies which have been tested in other English-language environments. At the same time, the visiting scientist is likely to find real surprises, particularly in the areas of race and politics.

The outside social scientist may be viewed with caution by the South African government. There have been instances where a foreign investigator, purporting to do one kind of study, gathered data on some sensitive issue, such as apartheid. These data, when published, were in turn seen as an attack on the South African government and its policies.

Given the potentially sensitive nature of television in South Africa, the outside investigator may find the government and potential collaborators cautious about what seem to be purely scientific decisions. Particularly in launching a longitudinal study, international scientists face the possibility that internal events within South Africa could force a modification or termination of the project. At the same time, the Western scientist may find South Africa emerging as a sensitive political issue at home. Increasingly, politicians have called for boycotts and other political pressures on the South African government. Thus, over the next decade, the Western scientist may find that even "purely scientific" research in South Africa has political implications at home.

Given the South African context, the international researcher and his funding sponsors will need real commitment to the importance of the research which can be accomplished. Secondly, in addition to expertise in television research, the scientist will need some maturity and sophistication in accomplishing research in potentially sensitive social contexts.

Plans for South African Television

When first introduced, South African television will offer one channel, divided equally between English and Afrikaans programming. The standard broadcast day will be five hours long, from 5:30 to 10:30 p.m., with additional programming, primarily sports, on the weekends. Subsequently, a second channel will be introduced; one channel will then broadcast in English and the other in Afrikaans. An eventual third channel is foreseen, which would open up the possibility of regional telecasts in six African languages: Xhosa, Zulu, etc.

When television is launched, transmission will blanket the 17 major urban areas, reaching a potential audience of 70% to 80% of the white population. Current projections are for the sale of some 130,000 sets in the first year, another 540,000 in the second year, and perhaps another 210,000 in the third year. All telecasts will originate in color and the West German color system has been adopted.

Proposed program content is described as "educational" in the broad sense of the word. Present plans call for two feature films each week, one in English and one in Afrikaans. Other programs will include comedy, drama, how-to-do-it shows, sports, and news. SABC officials are well aware that in most nations new television has brought with it a

flood of foreign programs. The SABC hopes that by limiting the total broadcast time, and by having lead-time before the introduction, South Africans will be able to produce about 85% of their own programs.

The question of programming is, of course, especially important for the researcher interested in the long-term effects of television. Unlike SABC radio, the television service will carry no advertising, at least for the first few years. When advertising does come, commercials will be limited to less than ten percent of the broadcast time. The advertiser will have no control over program content or the placement of his commercial. The SABC empowering act requires that programs be "not objectionable," that they be "not subversive," and that they insure "freedom of religion."

Translated into programming decisions, these regulations appear to make some high violence U.S. and British television shows not acceptable for South African television. Similarly, some comedy and variety shows would probably be considered too risque. And some dramatic and documentary shows might contain an unacceptable intermingling of the races.

At the same time, judging from the content of SABC radio and from decisions of the Publications Control Board, a broad range of dramatic programming seems likely. Although South African television is not likely to present the extremes of sex and violence seen on U.S. television, there appears to be no attempt to eliminate all types of violence from the media. Violence is acceptable in sports, e.g., rugby. Violence is acceptable where the forces of good overcome the forces of evil, e.g., law and order subduing crime or the West overcoming Communism. Violence

is acceptable in the portrayal of historical events, such as "the battle of Blood River," a famous episode in South African history. Dramatic entertainment generally is likely to command a smaller share of the total, with educational public service programs commanding a larger share. At the same time, South African community standards of what is objectional, subversive or sacrilegious are probably not too different from those applied to U.S. television in the 1950s, or from those still dominant in rural, "Bible-belt" America. Thus, it appears now that the researcher is likely to find a range of television content which matches in important respects the typical early TV inputs of Western, industrial societies.

South African Plans for Research

At the time of our visit in the winter of 1972, South Africans were just beginning to consider what research on television might be done. While South Africans have the potential for doing good research on television, it seems likely at present that their efforts will be undermanned and under-financed. In addition, their research efforts are likely to go toward answering short-range, practical problems within the South African context rather than toward some of the broader theoretical issues which have emerged in advanced television societies.

The Institute of Communication Research of the Human Sciences Research Council is seen by the government as having prime responsibility for research on television. The Institute is headed by Mr. H. J. Barnard, who has a background in education and survey research. He recently spent a year in the United States, at the Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, studying communication theory and research.

At the time of our visit, Barnard was in the process of putting together a staff of six to eight people, representing such disciplines as anthropology, sociology, psychology, and journalism. Plans called for an expansion of staff to 13 by early 1973. In addition, Barnard will have an advisory committee composed of university heads of departments of communication and representatives of SABC and industry. Mr. G. J. Yssel, Chairman of the SABC Television Implementation Committee, is likely to be the broadcast corporation representative. Other committee members include Professor T. L. de Koning, a psychologist and head of the department of communication at Rand Afrikaans University, Mr. H. P. Fourie, a psychologist at the University of South Africa, and Professor G. J. Pienaar, head of a department of communication and journalism at Potchefstroom University.

The Institute was formed in 1969 and is charged with conducting basic and applied research on the psychological, sociological and ethnological factors involved in communication and mass communication. While television research is likely to emerge as an important field, it is but one of the types of research the Institute is expected to handle. In early planning, the Institute had programmed as its first study a survey of viewer expectations: what they wanted in the way of programming, whether they intended to pruchase or rent a set, who would be available for viewing at what times, etc. For future consideration, the Institute has a list of potential research topics including: the effect of television on other media, the diffusion of the TV innovation, allocation of leisure time, attitude studies, (e.g., attitudes among the non-white population), influence on health, (e.g., posture, eyes, etc.), and effects

on family relationships and youth, including the instigation of anti-social behavior.

Given the scope of its charge, the Institute appears to have rather modest resources. The last decade of research in the United States and Britain seems to indicate that getting good answers to questions about the effects of television is a complex problem requiring sophisticated and hence expensive research strategies. Several of the individual experiments funded by the U.S. Surgeon General had budgets larger than the probable annual budget of the Institute for Communication Research. In early 1972, it appeared that the Institute was likely to have a budget of about ten percent of the HSRC budget, which in turn was only about a third of the amount spent under the U.S. Surgeon General's research program. The Institute may be able to command additional funds from SABC, particularly for audience surveys, and from special appropriations of Parliament. Since 1972, the South Africans have had a growing awareness of the research challenge and Institute funding has increased. But even with such auxiliary funds, the Institute will have relatively limited resources. Given the range of questions it is expected to answer, it seems most likely to replicate the kind of studies done in the early days of British and U.S. television, rather than focus on the difficult questions which now seem most important in the international scientific community.

At the national level, the other potentially relevant agency is the National Institute of Personnel Research, a branch of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research. NIPR was established over thirty years ago to study "areas of human behavior that have to do with

man at work." The Institute has built up a strong reputation for its empirical research in experimental and physiological psychology, in applied social psychology, in the study of the reactions of different rural ethnic groups to urban change, in the study of personalities in cross-cultural comparisons, and in metrics and test construction. The Institute has a large scientific staff of more than 80 researchers. At the time of our visit, the acting director was Dr. Gordon Nelson, an able and respected psychologist. NIPR has no plans to study the effects of television. But the Institute does represent an agency which has the potential capacity to do large-scale, complex, social psychological research on a contract basis.

Within the universities, research institutes are relatively rare. The University of Natal does have an Institute for Social Research (I.S.R.), headed by a young sociologist, Mr. Lawrence Schlemmer. The institute has a three-man staff and has collaborated with International scientists on projects of mutual interest.

At the University of Cape Town, Professor Hendrik W. van der Merwe heads the Abe Bailey Institute of Inter-Racial Studies. Supported by an endowment from the Abe Bailey Trust, the Institute fosters research on "inter-racial" topics. Inter-racial is interpreted quite broadly and might, for example, cover comparisons of English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking populations. Professor van der Merwe's own research has focused on the white elite in South Africa and he is a knowledgeable resource person on the nation's scientific establishment.

Several of the universities have strong behavioral science departments. For example, at the University of Witwatersrand,

Johannesburg, Professor J. W. Mann heads the department of psychology and Professor H. Lever heads the department of sociology. At the University of Cape Town, Professor Peter Radloff is head of psychology and Dr. F. van Zyl Slabbert is acting head of sociology. These particular scientists, however, have on-going research interests and are not likely to conduct research on questions of television effects. At both institutions, there are younger faculty members and graduate students who are not now doing research in the television area, but who might become interested in this area if the opportunity arose.

At the University of Cape Town, Dr. Marie van der Spuy is head of the child guidance center and a senior lecturer in psychology. He has had experience as part of a large-scale research team in England and has a strong interest in the potential of research on the effects of television on children. At Stellenbosch University, Dr. Elizabeth Nel is a young social psychologist with a similar interest in media effects on children. She spent a post-doctoral year at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1969, and has a good background in empirical research. While van der Spuy and Nel are both interested in television research, their present commitments preclude such work unless outside support is forthcoming.

Departments of communication are beginning to emerge at some of the South African universities; they tend to be small and oriented toward historical and critical studies as well as empirical research. At Rand Afrikaans University in Johannesburg, Professor T. L. de Koning heads a two-man department of communication which is now in its fourth year. Professor de Koning received his Ph.D. in psychology from the University

of Michigan in 1969 and he hopes to train his undergraduates and eventually his master's level students in communication research techniques. He is highly interested in empirical television research, but his own heavy teaching and administrative responsibilities may limit the amount of research he will do personally.

At the University of the Western Cape, Professor J. M. du Toit of the sociology department is interested in the educational effects of television for children and adults in the colored population. Both he and de Koning traveled in the United States and Europe during 1972 to gather information about recent television research.

In sum, South Africans have an interest in the potential of television research. They appear to have some, but not all, of the research skills needed to tackle the more difficult empirical problems. But most important, at the moment, they do not appear to be organized or funded in a way which will allow them to take full advantage of the research potential in front of them.

The Needed Research

Television has been linked to a vast range of possible effects at the personal and social levels. Questions have been raised about the consequences of television on fantasy life, attention span, patterns of aggression or altruism, childhood socialization, perceptions of social reality, interpersonal empathy, moral values, attitudes toward authority, leisure time allocation, etc. At the social level, questions have been raised about the effects of television on the diffusion of political information, public decision making, family interaction and structure,

different sub-groups within the population (e.g., different ethnic or racial sub-cultures), social awareness and activation, etc.

The South African situation presents a potential context for exploring many of these questions. But for the international scientific community, two important criteria emerge. Research should be directed toward those questions which (a) can be studied within the constraints of the South African political, economic and social context, and (b) cannot be studied anywhere else. In short, given the difficulty and expense of research in South Africa, international efforts must be directed to those last-chance opportunities which can be found nowhere else and which promise the highest social and scientific payoff.

From our explorations, it seems unwise for the non-African scientist to probe the effects of television on the South African, non-white, rural populations, although many interesting questions could be asked in this area. There are, first of all, other non-Western, non-industrial populations around the world which could be studied to explore some of those effects. Secondly, the South Africans themselves seem best equipped to do research on cross-racial questions within their society. Finally, the issue of race is so potentially sensitive in South Africa that the outside scientist is likely to jeopardize other research possibilities if he pursues racial differences.

From the recent international research on television, it would also seem that the most important social questions relate to the effects of television on children. While a number of possible effects have been cited for adult populations, the greatest concern has emerged around the possible effects of this powerful and pervasive medium during a child's formative years.

To probe the question of effects on children, a two-pronged research strategy seems most appropriate. The first thrust would put an emphasis on experimental research in the present, pre-television period. Briefly, groups of children could be shown on videotape different "diets" of television content for weeks, months or even years. The second research thrust would follow a longitudinal pattern, gathering pre-television baseline data now, and then following the children for two to four years as they are exposed to regular broadcast television.

This two-pronged approach would, of course, permit the study of a range of research questions. Again, in terms of emerging international priorities, two areas seem especially important. One has to do with the effects of different types of content on social behavior, e.g., the viewing of pro-social programs or high-action adventure and the consequent altruistic or aggressive behavior. A second area concerns the longer range development of social values and moral judgments during childhood. Background data on this issue would also permit cross-cultural comparisons with samples from other Western nations. This, in turn, would facilitate inferences about the generalizability of South African findings.

Models for Organizing Research

This two-pronged approach could, of course, be done by independent researchers or as part of one large study. In the latter case, the control group for the pre-television experimental study could form the nucleus of the panel followed over time. But given the two-pronged, experimental and longitudinal model, how might the international scientific community facilitate such research?

One solution would be for a senior non-African investigator or team of investigators to conduct research, with outside funding and little or no reliance on South African resources. This would permit the South Africans to concentrate their research on the problems of greatest concern to them. The international team could focus on the questions which have broader and perhaps more long-range implications for all Western societies. The disadvantage of such a model is that it would require a senior investigator to commit a fairly substantial amount of time to living and working in South Africa. Given the distances involved, it would not be easy for him to commute to other activities and it would thus require a fairly complete commitment to the television research. Finally, such an all-outside venture would be fairly expensive.

A second alternative would be to find a senior South African scientist and provide him with outside funding. While the South African would probably have an easier time doing research in his own country than an outsider would, this alternative, too, has some disadvantages. In the first place, it might be difficult to find a senior man willing to make the switch from his established research into a new area. South Africa is a small country and the scientific manpower is (a) well employed, and (b) organized rather tightly in government or university programs. It is not easy to move from one large research project to another. In addition, the project would still be expensive, and many potential foreign funding sources might have some hesitation about turning such a large investigation over to someone who could not be judged within the domestic scientific framework.

A parallel alternative would be to contract for the research with an established South African research agency. A group such as the National Institute of Personnel Research could, for instance, undertake contract research for an outside party. NIPR would not have to start from scratch to set up a research organization and its past work is well known and easy to evaluate.

A fourth alternative would be a series of separate, small, collaborative efforts between international and South African researchers, where funding came from a variety of domestic and international sources. This piece-meal approach is probably less efficient, with more energy going into organizing the elements, and the likelihood of overlap and gaps between research efforts. In general, the questions which seem most important require sophisticated, intensive, long-range attack. A series of small projects could become expensive and still not get to the major issues. But given the importance of the issues, even partial answers to a few questions would be better than no answers at all.

A fifth alternative is to provide international consultants to interested South African researchers to help with the difficult methodologies which may be required, and aid in focusing on the larger theoretical issues which could be answered in the South African context. While this could upgrade the research undertaken, the South African research funds are not likely to be sufficient to mount the scope of research needed to answer some of the most important questions.

A final alternative is to assist in providing specialized training for South African researchers, for example, by providing fellowships to South African graduate students or junior faculty who might wish to train

for communication research in the United States. While this might increase the pool of research skills, and make research more efficient and effective, it would not solve the problem of funding research within the South African context.

The challenge is obvious. The question is whether the international scientific community, and those agencies which fund research will respond.

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